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ABSTRACT

Research on role-model identification has demonstrated the powerful effect that models have on individuals' behavior. To extend prior research on this phenomenon, the role-model identifications of first-, third-, fifth-, and ninth-grade students were outlined and examined. The results did not support the hypothesis that adolescents identify with academic role-models relative to their level of achievement. Subjects in each grade identified most often with their peers, less often with their parents, and least often with their teachers. Early adolescents may be on the verge of expanding their social horizons by establishing identification with teachers, but the data only suggest such a development. Even the youngest subjects had already made a significant move away from their parents and toward their peers, which may be explained by previous research on the relationship between perceived personal similarity and role-model identification. (Author/CS)

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Role-Model Identification and School Achievement:

A Developmental Study

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Abstract

Research in role-model identification (Kagan, 1967; Rosenkrans, 1967) has demonstrated the powerful effect models have on individuals' behaviors. Csikszentmihalyi (1978) has suggested that identifications are based upon the ability of the identifier to produce behaviors consistent with the values presented and encouraged by the role-model. In a test of this proposition, Williams (1980) has shown that 16-18 year-old males differ in academic role-model identification as a function of their level of academic achievement. The present study extended prior research by outlining the role-model identifications formed by first, third, fifth, and ninth grade females and males (N = 106). The results of this investigation did not support the hypothesis that adolescents would identify with their academic role-models relative to their level of achievement, but indicated patterns of identification similar to those previously shown by low achievers.

Role-Model Identification and School Achievement: A Developmental Study

Although identification is a concept central to the personality development literature, it has received little serious attention as an aspect of social-cognitive growth. As a consequence, the factors which contribute to the emergence of these behaviors have yet to be fully isolated. Early clinical conceptions of this phenomenon (Freud, 1937) presented identifications as behaviors cast of rear and reaction: in defense. The actual or projected loss of object relations, love, or self-esteem, and the imposition of a real or perceived threat to one's physical or psychological existance were thought to be the primary causes of identification. Later empirical research on identification processes (Bandura, 1962, 1965, 1968) demonstrated that anguish and fear were not the only causes for the adoption of actions, but that patterns of behavior could be learned through simple exposure to role-models. Unfortunately, neither of these approaches even hint that identifications are the products of active interest and involvement initiated by the identifier.

Most recently, research detailing a social cognitive approach to socialization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978) has suggested that identifications are established through the conscious and voluntary focusing of attention by both the role-model and the identifier on one another. Kagan (1967) has also presented evidence which supports the idea that individuals narrow the focus of their attention in identification based relationships. He found that subjects pay closer attention to role-models whom they think share personological dispositions with them than they do to models who manifest fewer such characteristics. In related works, Rosenkrans (1967) demonstrated the most effective role-models (in terms of eliciting imitative

behaviors) to be those persons with whom observers believed they held the most in common, while Gewirtz & Stingle (1968) have contended that focused generalized imitations form the bases of identifications.

Other formulations of identification theory also suggested that the primary interpersonal links were formed within the family unit, but that as children grew older they began to look outside the family for individuals who could serve as useful models for attaining career and life goals. The adoption of peers as role-models is said to begin in middle childhood, while the searching for non-familial adult role-models is thought to coincide with the onset of formal operational thinking (Elkind, 1970; Erikson, 1968; Mussen, Conger, & Kagan, 1974).

In the school setting, Csikszentmihalyi (1978) believes that teacher identifications are born of an understanding on the part of certain individuals that they are able to produce specific behaviors that are at once enjoyable to themselves and pleasing to their teachers. If this speculation in viewed in light of the idea that adult role-models begin to be adopted in adolescence, it can then be expected that teenagers who display behaviors that are consistent with teachers' classroom expectations (academic success) should identify more strongly with teachers than adolescent students who do not display such behaviors. Research done with a population of 16-18 year-old males (Williams, 1980) can be understood as a preliminary test of Csikszentmihalyi's speculation. The results obtained by Williams support the proposition that academic success and teacher identification are related by demonstrating that high achievers identified most often with liked teachers, then with peers, and least with teachers, while low achievers identified most with peers, then with parents, and least with teachers.

The primary intent of this study was to extend prior research on the

relationship between academic achievement and role-model identification in order to determine when and if the strength of teacher identification begins to increase. It was expected that pre-adolescent children would have stronger ties to their family members and a less abstract understanding of the important role that teachers play in the attainment of career goals than would adolescents. It was hypothesized that there would be differences in the strength of parent and teacher identifications made by pre-adolescent and adolescent subjects. Specifically, it was expected that pre-adolescents would identify most often with their parents, while adolescents would identify most often with their peers and teachers. Additionally, high achieving adolescents were expected to identify with their teachers more often than low achieving adolescents because of their ability to produce behaviors (academic success) that are consistent with the values expressed and promoted by the teacher.

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects of this study were 106 females and males drawn from the first, third, fifth, and ninth grades of an urban mid-western school district. The population was racially mixed (21% black) and was composed of 25 first graders, 25 third graders, 21 fifth graders, and 35 ninth graders. The mean ages of the children in each respective grade were 83.0 months, 107.9 months, 131.1 months, and 177.9 months. All subjects participated on a voluntary basis and were assured of confidentiality of personal information.

Role Construct Repertory Test. An identification Grid adaptation of the Role Construct Repertory Test (Kelly, 1955) was used to assess the patterns of role-model identifications formed by the subjects. The Repertory Test was devised by George Kelly as a way of outlining the

psychological structures that constitute persons' interpersonal relationships. The standard application of the method proceeds by eliciting from subjects the names of their acquaintances who fit into significant social roles (best friend, liked-teacher, employer, etc.,). The subjects are then presented with a number of systematically arranged triads of these elicited names (often including the "self" as one of the group members), and are asked to indicate in what important way two of the three persons presented in each comparison triad are alike and how the third person is different than the other two. Through this manner of questioning, the investigator not only gains information as to the structure of the subjects; in interpersonal relationships (which persons are perceived to be the most similar), but is also apprised of the content of the constructs underlying these relationships.

Prior research using Repertory Test protocols has focused on both aspects of the individuals patterns of response. Interpersonal relationship networks have been analyzed for complexity of structure, fixedness, and lopsidedness (cf. Bannister, 1960, 1962; Fransella, 1968), while construct content has been analyzed for its complexity, depth, and diversity of application to each of the individuals presented on the protocol (Bieri, 1955, 1966; Crockett, 1965; Scareltt, Press, & Crockett, 1971). In spite of the fact that the Repertory Test and its various hybrids have been widely used and accepted in clinical and personality psychology (for comprehensive reviews see; Adams-Webber, 1979; Bannsiter & Mair, 1968), it is only recently that applications have broadened to include social-developmental research (Bannister & Agnew, 1977; Barratt, 1977a, 1977b; Barenboim, 1976; Duck, 1975).

Current adaptation. The subjects were individually administered

Identification Grids (Williams, 1980) by one of three graduate students. Each subject was taken to a testing room and asked the following preliminary questions; "Of all the teachers that you have had, which one do you like the best?"; "Which teacher do you like the next best?"; "Who is your best friend?"; "Who is your next best friend?" The subjects' responses to each of these questions were recorded on separate index cards. After these questions were answered, the interviewers took three additional cards, and in the view of the subject explained that they were going to make cards that read "mom," "dad," and "Me." The students' parents' given names were also recorded on the appropriate cards and the interviewers explained that "'Me' means you!" and that the subjects were to try to think about themselves as "you are today."

The participants were then presented with 15 systematically arranged triads of names (each possible pair of the six role-models' names combined with the "Me" tag), and were asked upon presentation of each set of three cards to tell the interviewers <u>in what important way two of the three persons were most alike and how the third person differed from the other two</u>. Because the "Me" tag appeared in each triad, the subjects were forced to compare themselves to various pairs of their acquaintances and to simultaneously assess their similarity to each person in each pair. On a separate scoring sheet the investigators recorded the subjects' responses to these questions by circling the names of the two most similar persons and by copying down the exact words the subjects used to describe their perceptions of interpersonal similarities and differences. Each of the names of the subjects' acquaintances were presented together once and only once.

<u>Scoring</u>. The identification score was the number of times

an individual indicated that they were more similar to one person in a triad than their two acquaintances were to each other. The numbers of identifications made with each individual peer, parent, and teacher were compiled and compared by grade and level of academic achievement scores on the California Achievement Test (CAT).

RESULTS

Because first grade students were not given achievement test batteries, only the third, fifth, and ninth grade data were used in testing the first hypothesis presented below. Subsequent analyses included all groups of subjects.

Profile analysis (Harris, 1975) of the CAT data indicate that high and low achieving third, fifth, and ninth graders do not differ in their strength of identification with teachers. These groups also did not differ significantly in their frequency of identification with parents or peers. There are however consistent significant differences within all four grade levels in regard to the number of identifications individuals made with each of the acquaintance groups. The subjects in each grade identified

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Insert Table 1 about here

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most often with their peers, then with their parents, and least with their teachers, $F(2, 101) = 115.06$, $p < .0001$. There are no significant variations from this pattern of identification attributable to either race or sex when analyses were performed collapsed across grade level.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study neither support the hypothesis that ninth graders would be distinguished from younger children by identifying more

often with teachers and peers and less often with parents than younger children, nor the hypothesis that high achieving ninth graders would identify more often with their teachers than low achieving adolescents. These findings are not supportive of Csikszentmihalyi's (1978) proposal that academic attainment and teacher identification are related, and are likewise inconsistent with previous research done with 16-18 year-olds (Williams, 1980). Although ninth graders should have the cognitive capacity to form academic role-model identifications, these individuals may not feel the need to establish such relationships. Early adolescents may be secure in the belief that close interpersonal ties with peers and parents are all that are currently necessary, but they also may be on the verge of beginning to expand their social horizons by establishing teacher identifications. Unfortunately, the data presented here only hint of the emergence of such a shift.

It is useful to note that the subjects of this study, at each grade level, identify most often with their peers, then with their parents, and least with their teachers. These results are somewhat at odds with traditionally conceived patterns of role-model identification (Mussen, Conger, & Kagan, 1974). One would expect that at least the youngest children would identify most strongly with their parents because of familial ties, and then only secondarily with their peers, but it appears that even the youngest subjects have already made a significant move away from their parents. These findings do however make sense when considered in relation to Kagan's (1967) and Rosenkrans' (1967) research on perceived similarity and role-model identification.

The identification research presented here suggests the existence of an interpersonal social awareness that has received little if any

coverage in the social cognition literature. It could be that the phenomenon of role-model identification is actually a "competency-based" form of role-taking behavior (cf. Chandler, 1973), whereby individuals who are proficient in certain skill areas are able to understand the importance of these socially defined skill situations, given the existence of the need to understand (cf. Flavell, 1968), better than those individuals who lack such competencies. It would be most useful to pursue this research with a population of ninth and twelfth graders in order replicate previous findings, to determine when achievement role-model identifications begin to occur, and to see if such patterns of behavior are restricted to academic contexts.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Identifications Made With

Parents, Peers, and Teachers by Grade Level

Role-Model	Grade							
	First		Third		Fifth		Ninth	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Parents	4.16	2.52	4.20	2.33	4.09	2.19	3.85	2.31
Peers	6.16	2.37	6.24	1.85	5.76	1.97	6.43	2.15
Teachers	1.40	1.73	1.48	1.23	1.43	2.09	1.97	1.77
	N = 25		N = 25		N = 21		N = 35	